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ABSTRACT

The current approach to promoting educational equity in universities in Australia is substantially flawed. Through the "equity framework," the Australian university community sector has been compelled to involvement with educational equity through government pressure that has included financial incentives and legislation. Six groups have been identified as disadvantaged: people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, women, non-English speakers, people with disabilities, and people from rural or remote areas. To date, the basis for promoting educational equity in Australian universities has been overly reliant on compulsion, as expressed through pressure from government or legislation; and on arguments of social justice which generate more debate than commitment. University planners should promote educational equity based on its importance to the future social and economic development of Australia. Such considerations stress examination of an organization's mission and purpose within the society which it serves. (Contains 55 references.) (Author/JLS)

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ED 410 872

What Should Drive Educational Equity and Student Diversity in Australian Higher Education?

Social Responsibility Versus Reporting Obligation

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This paper was presented at the Thirty-Seventh Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research held in Orlando, Florida, May 18-21, 1997. This paper was reviewed by the AIR Forum Publications Committee and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC Collection of Forum Papers.

Jean Endo
Editor
AIR Forum Publications

Abstract

The paper highlights flaws in the approaches taken to promote educational equity as a major concern for universities in Australia. It is argued that, to date, the basis for promoting educational equity in Australian universities has been overly reliant on compulsion, as expressed through pressure from government or legislation; and on arguments of social justice which generate more debate than commitment. It is suggested that university planners should constitute a 'third front' in the promotion of a consideration of educational equity as a key and strategic issue for higher education in Australia, based on the importance of educational equity to the future social and economic development of Australia and on the responsibility of universities to contribute to these developments. Such considerations extend the 'why' of planning beyond the use of such decision-supporting elements as performance indicators or user-surveys into an examination of an organization's mission and purpose within the society which it serves.

University planners generally appreciate that their role in organizations is multi-faceted. They guide the mechanisms of planning, aid in improving the processes of decision-making and directly advise decision-makers. 'What', 'who', where' and 'when' are staples of the trade and a considerable amount of literature exists which discuss processes which can influence decisions in these areas. Concerns must exist, however, about the 'why' of modern planning. With the increased corporatization of the Australian university sector, the 'why' of planning is now typically based on such 'corporate' devises as performance indicators, user surveys and environmental analyses. Each of these can provide useful inputs but they rarely extend beyond providing reasons for making decisions. The 'why' of university planning should not only provide sound reasons for making decisions - it should extend, as a routine practice, to a consideration of the underlying philosophies influencing the basis for decision-making. Planners do engage in processes which extend to this level in assisting in developing institutional missions and long-term institutional goals. However, these processes are typically infrequent, perhaps being undertaken every five to ten years, and the outcomes of these processes are typically statements which more resemble cliche than a genuine expression of commitment or a meaningful statement of purpose. Universities are notoriously conservative organizations; being extremely resistant to change. Hence it is particularly important that discussions of change at any level are associated with a consideration of the institution's role and position in society. This will hopefully lead to appropriate change with an underlying rationale which inspires genuine commitment.

An excellent example of an issue in Australian higher education which has suffered as a result of a failure by its advocates to appropriately articulate and communicate its underlying philosophies and rationales is educational equity. This paper discusses the place of educational equity in Australian higher education, identifies some of the problems being faced by educational equity in the university sector and explores possible rationales for suggesting that it is a strategic area which warrants institutional commitment.

For the purpose of this paper the following interpretation of educational equity will be used, which is in line with generally accepted views in higher education: 'Educational equity involves universities engaging in system and institutional action which results in a student profile that fairly reflects the diversity of Australian society.'

It is noted that the varying interpretations of the term 'fairly' are still likely to create different interpretations by individuals of how educational equity should be enacted. However, this definition will serve as a useful basis for discussion.

Rationales for the Importance of Educational Equity in Higher Education

For those who may wish to try and convince the university sector to embrace educational equity as a central theme, there are a number of approaches which could be used to frame potentially convincing arguments. A consideration of equity in education can be justified from a number of perspectives:

a) economic rationalists note the need for society to fully utilize the individual potential available to it in order to remain internationally competitive;

b) social scientists point to the social problems which may result from an uneven distribution of educational opportunity;

c) proponents of social justice describe equitable access to educational opportunities as an inalienable right of each individual within a democratic society; and

d) arguments arise from the need for universities, as publicly funded institutions created under State Acts, to be shared equally amongst all individuals in society and to contribute to Australia as a just and socially responsible society.

Each of these arguments will be discussed briefly.

'Human Capital' Theory

The international trend over the past half-century of a movement from elite to mass higher education, and continuing towards universal higher education, is well documented (Trow, 1973; Thomas, 1990; Goedegebuure et al. 1994). A central feature of this trend has been an expansion of higher education. The increase in the size of the student body in many countries has been dramatic. Ramirez and Riddle (1991, p. 95) noted that in 1955 the "national tertiary enrolment average for developed countries was 6% in contrast to 0.9% for developing countries [while] ... by 1985 these averages had risen to 25% and 9% respectively." Perkin (1991, p. 199) asserts that:

> The reasons for the unprecedented expansion of higher education are twofold: (1) the demand of a more complex and highly geared economy for applied science and technology and for the social and

administrative sciences for managing large institutions and corporate structures; and (2) the demand in a post-industrial society providing more sophisticated services for highly educated personnel to operate and service them.

This influence is apparent in post-War Australia. Society has moved from accepting universities as a place of higher learning for a privileged few, to an appreciation that "A higher education system which in any way resembles an enclave for a select socio-economic group is unlikely to be a useful foundation for a society faced with the widespread consequences of social and technological change" (Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, 1990, p. 123).

Equity, in this light, comes to represent an investment in society's human capital. Recent Australian governments have certainly been well aware of this link between equity and maximizing human capital. "The larger and more diverse is the pool from which we draw our skilled workforce, the greater our capacity to take advantage of opportunities as they emerge. The current barriers to participation [in higher education] of financially and other disadvantaged groups limit our capacity to develop the highest skilled workforce possible and are a source of economic insufficiency" (Dawkins, 1988, p. 7). However, beyond the rhetoric expounded in the 'White Paper' these are arguments which have not been effectively sold to the Australian university sector.

Social Harmony

A compelling argument for educational equity in some contexts comes from a consideration of demographic trends. For example, trends indicating that the

proportion of school age children made up of so-called 'ethnic minorities' in the USA would rise to one-third of the population by the turn of the century led to the realization that "Failure to provide educational opportunities for one-third of a nation ... [would] have herculean social and economic costs" (Lindsay, 1990, p. 200). Similar demographic trends have led to similar conclusions being reached elsewhere in the world as well; for example, in Canada (F. Lamb, personal communication, 17 October, 1995).

These represent contemporary examples supporting a liberal democratic view of equality of opportunity in education as a means to promote democracy, social harmony, social mobility and equality. Angus (1991) points in particular to the possibility for upward social mobility to limit the likelihood of class conflict in society. If disadvantage is perceived as a basis for conflict and social disharmony, then fair access to education provides a basis for diffusing this conflict through the provision of opportunity. From this perspective, the argument which might be put to the dominant culture in society to gain its support for equity in education is: 'if you don't like the effects, then do something about the cause.'

Social Justice

Considerable progress has been made in Australia since World War II in the area of social justice. This has been accompanied by a better understanding of the causes of disadvantage within society and how this disadvantage has tended to be reinforced and perpetuated by education systems (Anderson & Vervoorn, 1983; Smith, 1985). Trow (1973) referred to the 'democratization' of higher education which has occurred worldwide where a university education ceases to be seen as a

privilege, but rather is viewed as a right. The importance of education in transforming and empowering individuals lies at the heart of this line of argument. It has been argued that a fundamental right of people in a democratic society is the right to seek to improve the quality of their lives. "A ... [university] degree provides increased employment opportunities as well as enhanced social standing. Anything less than full access for all citizens to this important credential is clearly unjust" (Green, 1989, p. 29). The prevailing view is that under-representation of particular groups in higher education has not occurred because of individual abilities and choices, but is the result of systemic factors - a complex interaction between society at large and education as one of its powerful institutions. It has been stated in official terms in Australia thus:

> What is not tolerated ... is the argument that sub-population groups - social classes, ethnic groups, for example - may differ, on the average, in terms of their abilities and / or motivations; sub-population groups are not more or less capable or motivated on the whole, though individuals may be (Williams, 1987, p. 11).

This has led to the equating of under-representation in higher education with disadvantage and to the calls for this disadvantage to be addressed. As major institutions within society, universities are seen to have responsibilities in this area. The view is summed up well by Mukherjee (1996, p. 1):

> A just and fair society is one in which all people are able to participate fully in social, political and economic life and where everyone is able to determine the direction of their own lives. In a democracy, all

institutions have a responsibility to work towards a more just and equal society and the role of education is both central and fundamental.

Various models can be constructed around these basic themes - with bases ranging from considerations of welfare to considerations of individual empowerment. As a general theme, proponents of social justice describe equitable access to educational opportunities as an inalienable right of each individual within a democratic society. As such, it is seen to be the responsibility of all of society's institutions to ensure that justice and the rights of individual citizens are appropriately upheld.

Responsibility to Share A Publicly Funded Resource

Another argument supporting the need for equity in higher education comes from a consideration of how higher education is funded in Australia. Important to this argument is an appreciation that higher education in Australia is predominantly funded directly by the federal (Commonwealth) government (Meek, 1994) causing the Commonwealth government to view higher education as if it were an extension of the public service. Fundamental to public service reform in Australia has been a commitment by the government to "... ensuring that all Australians, irrespective of their race, culture, religion or first language [etc], are able to benefit equitably from the resources it manages on behalf of the community" (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 1994, p. I). As funding for the Australian higher education system amounts to over $5 billion per annum from public moneys, the federal government has been forthright in stating that higher education should therefore be shared by all sections of Australian society and not restricted to a privileged few.

This argument is all the stronger when considering that a central justification for the considerable growth in funded places which occurred in Australia as part of the 'White Paper' reforms - which saw student enrolments rising from 395,000 in 1987 to over 630,000 in 1996 - was for the purpose of educational equity. "Part of the strategy for achieving equity in higher education is to provide growth in the higher education system" (Dawkins, 1988, p. 53).

Many academics feel uncomfortable with the view that government funding raises a responsibility on the part of their university to support national objectives. This idea is generally seen as running counter to the notion of institutional autonomy. In truth the situation is little different from the concept of 'professional patronage' which has been a feature of Art and Science in Western cultures for centuries. As well, universities in the European tradition have clearly played a major role in the pursuit of national / political objectives since their inception (Scott, 1995). It is clear, though, that the importance of the university sector's role in achieving national social and economic objectives has been appreciated by government's all over the world and in Australia universities have been expected to respond to such demands by society since the 1960s

The Means By Which Equity Has Been Driven in Australian higher education

Postle et al. (1997) identified the two dominant drivers of educational equity in the university sector as the government through the actions of its department DEET, now DEETYA, and advocates working within the sector. The basic approaches taken

by these two major drivers of equity are examined below with suggestions made as to the consequences of these approaches.

To a large degree, the Australian university sector has been compelled to become involved in considerations of educational equity through government pressure (sweetened with some incentive funding), and specific legislation. This is most evident through the so-called 'equity framework' which has operated for the past seven years. In 1990 the Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) developed the policy statement A Fair Chance For All: Higher Education That's Within Everyone's Reach (DEET, 1990). This document identified six groups as 'disadvantaged' on the basis of under-representation in the sector - people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, women (particularly in non-traditional areas of study), people from non-English speaking backgrounds, people with disabilities and people from rural and geographically isolated areas. It stated the overall objective for equity in higher education: "to ensure that Australians from all groups in society have the opportunity to participate successfully in higher education" (DEET, 1990, p. 2). Targets were set for the sector to address the needs of each of these groups and a range of strategies were described which could be employed to pursue social justice objectives. Universities have been required to develop annual equity plans and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational strategies in which performance in the area of social justice has been reported. Equity has remained a set agenda item for the annual 'Educational Profiles' discussions held between DEET representatives and university management. Universities have been awarded Higher Education Equity

Program (HEEP) grants from a $4-5 million per annum Commonwealth pool with funds disbursed on the basis of the relative assessment of all institutional equity plans; while a separate, somewhat larger pool has existed to fund indigenous higher education. Through this 'equity framework' the government has sought to force universities to respond to considerations of educational equity; an aspect of what Smart (1991) has referred to as 'coercive federalism' via "a mix of regulatory sticks and deregulatory carrots" (Henry, 1992, p. 401).

Legislation has also played a role in the pursuit of equity in higher education. A suite of state and federal anti-discrimination acts - such as the Racial Discrimination Act (Commonwealth of Australia, 1975) and the Sex Discrimination Act (Commonwealth of Australia, 1984) - have played a role in setting the scene for social justice considerations in university enrolments. However, perhaps most significant in its impact has been the Disability Discrimination Act (Commonwealth of Australia, 1992) which has been used to significant effect in coercing universities to provide more opportunities and support for people with disabilities.

It would be incorrect to suggest that Australian universities did not initiate programs to encourage and recruit students from disadvantaged backgrounds prior to the commencement of the government and legislative initiatives of the 1980s and 1990s. However, the growth in activity in educational equity which has occurred since the introduction of the national equity framework (DEET, 1990), and the sudden emphasis given by universities to people with disabilities following the enactment of The Disability Discrimination Act (Commonwealth of Australia, 1992) indicate that some degree of compulsion has been necessary to promote any degree of significant

activity in this area in many institutions (Postle et al., 1997). However, although some real progress has been made in increasing activity in educational equity in universities, the total reliance on compulsion by government has tended to result in a response by the sector which has an air of superficiality and transience. The reasons for this are many-fold. As a first consideration, the university sector has a natural aversion to being compelled to do something and tends, as a matter of course, to react negatively to such attempts, almost regardless of the issue concerned. As Goedegebuure et al. (1994, p. 327) note "however rational or equitable the goals of public policy, the policies themselves are often rejected or negated by an implementation process highly influenced by entrenched institutional tradition and vested interest." Hence, in order to achieve change, it is necessary for the university community itself to perceive the need for the change and to react accordingly. This is often not well understood by government. It is notable that A Fair Chance For All (DEET, 1990, p. 1) provided as the only rationale for a consideration of educational equity in higher education the statement: "In Higher Education: A Policy Statement (the White Paper) issued in July 1988, the government made a commitment to the development of a long-term strategy that would make equity objectives a central concern of higher education management, planning and review." There has been little effort by government, through its department, to *convince* universities that educational equity is something with which it should be involved or to place the rationale for an involvement in educational equity in a form which is meaningful or relevant to the sector.

The other major driver of equity comes from advocates working within the sector. This group has relied on the pressure being put on universities by the Australian government for 'reform' but has otherwise tended to rely heavily on arguments relating to 'social justice' as a basis for supporting educational equity in higher education. It is argued that this also represents a major failing. This is not to say that social justice is not, and should not be, a major and important consideration in education. However, the flaw in a stance which relies heavily on social justice as a principal argument is that social justice is subject to vastly different interpretations by individuals. It thus does not serve as a solid sole grounding for determining an institution's overall goals and directions. For example, Fisk (1989) asserts that views of social justice are dependent on social context and rejects any notion that there are universal principles of justice. Rizvi and Lingard (1993) note that social justice is not well defined and that it is value laden:

> It is now relatively uncontroversial, even in philosophical circles, to suggest that the idea of social justice does not have a single essential meaning - it represents discourses that are historically constituted and it is a site of conflicting and divergent political endeavors (Rizvi & Lingard, p. 5).

Although the economic ('human capital') arguments supporting equity are quite compelling and clearly serve as central themes of government policies in this area, they are used surprisingly little by advocates of educational equity in Australian higher education. There is a tendency for them to be down-played, or even ignored, by these advocates in favor of the more laudable, but far less tangible, rationale based

on social justice. It would seem that in their eyes, educational equity and social justice are linked and that this provides rationale enough. It is perhaps noteworthy that when the Secretary to DEET was asked to address the First National Conference on Equity and Access in Australian Higher Education in 1993, to an audience largely made up of equity advocates, he felt obliged to state that "The government's higher education equity policy is a part of its broader social justice strategy" (Volker, 1993, p. 14) as the sole thrust of the government's commitment to this area. A perception of the inherent 'right' of educational equity may seem so apparent to many of its advocates that the need for an underlying rationale or justification is seldom raised. The fact that a common and agreed perception of social justice is impossible to obtain provides fertile ground for constructive debate, but it forms a poor basis on which to base an institutional commitment on which all can appreciate and follow.

Another flaw in this heavy reliance on social justice in promoting educational equity to the university sector is the degree to which social justice has been pursued through the use of legislation. Although effective in promoting activity - as the response by universities to the enactment of The Disabilities Discrimination Act (Commonwealth of Australia, 1992) in increasing activities for people with disabilities (Postle et al. 1997) indicates - it provides a poor basis for changing the underlying culture. Again, the university sector's natural reaction to compulsion is frequently to adopt an adversarial stance and many Australian universities have responded to the challenge of the Disabilities Discrimination Act by seeking legal advice to attempt to find ways to limit their legal obligations under the Act, rather than responding more positively to the responsibilities which it raises. The situation

is not helped by the Australian government's refusal to accept any responsibility for assisting universities or with even considering their genuine concerns about their ability to resource their commitments in this area. The situation is different elsewhere in the world. For example, in Ontario targeted funding is provided to assist universities in providing accommodation and support services for students with disabilities (F. Lamb, personal communication, 17 October, 1995).

Hence, both major advocates for educational equity in higher education have failed to convince the 'powers that be' in universities that it is an issue which should be pursued.

Perhaps not surprisingly, there is evidence which suggests that these approaches have resulted in a lack of real commitment by much of the university sector to the area of educational equity. Certainly, major gaps have been identified in the performance of universities in achieving progress in educational equity, particularly with regards to improving opportunities for the socioeconomically disadvantaged, and people from rural and geographically isolated areas (National Board of Employment, Education and Training (NBEET), 1996; Postle et al., 1997). As well, concerns exist about the sustainability of educational equity as a driving issue in higher education. Ramsay (1995, p. 7) notes that:

> ... the current framework for equity planning, reporting and particularly funding has resulted in staffing and structural arrangements which have several dysfunctional characteristics in terms of achieving long term change towards equity in higher education. In most universities, the programs themselves and the staff responsible

for them are scattered amongst a range of units and structures, often at a fairly powerless level in institutional terms and working in relative isolation from each other. In addition, institutional responsibility for equity matters is generally located with a number of senior management, at a level so remote from the operational staff that overall equity leadership and coordination become even more unlikely or ineffective, a matter of chance or personality rather than structural intention.

Equity is frequently perceived by equity practitioners working in the higher education sector to be marginalized. For example, a recent study undertaken by three Queensland tertiary institutions showed that comparatively few academic staff are well versed in equity policy and even fewer are aware of the support needs of their increasingly diverse student population (Postle et al. 1996).

Educational Equity As A Social Responsibility for Universities

The above discussion has highlighted what are seen as flaws in the approaches taken to promote educational equity as a major concern for universities in Australia. The federal government, through its department, has relied too heavily on forcing universities to respond to what it perceives as an important political agenda without attempting to frame that agenda in terms which the sector can relate to. Advocates of educational equity working within the sector tend to rely too heavily on arguments based on individual perceptions of 'right' and 'social justice' which may not be

shared by others in the sector. In all the outcome has been a superficial commitment being made by many universities with educational equity programs resting precariously outside of the mainstream of university activities.

Calls have been made for the need for 'cultural change' in universities to embrace educational equity as a central theme. For example, the National Board of Employment, Education and Training (NBEET) (1996, p. x) states:

> The culture of the higher education system itself as identified through the values reflected in the major teaching, research and community service functions must now be addressed so that its impact on participation and success of these under-represented groups can be fully understood.

Yet such calls for action are likely to meet deaf ears unless the sector itself is ready and willing to undertake such soul-searching analysis and is ready to accept the need for cultural change. It is suggested that such cultural change can only occur through the mainstream university community itself and that such changes will only result if the underlying rationale for equity is expressed in terms which the mainstream university community can relate to. University planners have a role in providing a 'third front' for promoting a consideration of educational equity to the university sector based on a broad range of rationales, especially those related to the economic and cultural development of society, and linking educational equity very much with a university's commitment to serving its society. The main thrust of this thesis is that there are sound arguments to suggest that educational equity is a strategic issue for,

contribute to the definition and achievement of the nation's social and economic goals" (The University of Southern Queensland, 1996, p. 11). Such a goal was not developed to encompass any notion of educational equity, but clearly it must include considerations of educational equity if it is successfully argued that such considerations contribute to "... the nation's social and economic goals."

Having stated this argument, it is appreciated the problems which the approach will meet. The fragmented organizational structure of universities coupled with the diffuse nature of collegial decision-making processes serve to make cultural change in universities extremely slow and difficult (Goedegebuure et al., 1994). As well, the reward systems which exist within the sector support the pursuit of research and academic freedom as axiomatic doctrines and do not favor the pursuit of institutional directions towards public service in the ways which have been described (Astin 1991). However, the sector is changing. Greater emphasis is being given now to the links between a university and its community. The 'corporatization' of the sector has given greater emphasis to corporate planning and the pursuit of institutional goals to which all institutional planners are naturally a party. As such, planners have the potential to significantly influence movements in this area.

There is also a need to consider the vexing question of institutional autonomy. The oft-quoted stance of the Australian Higher Education Council that "institutional autonomy should be the freedom to choose students, to decide who will teach them and how, and to determine within broad parameters what themes and topics they will research" (Higher Education Council, 1995, p. 11) will only pose a problem for educational equity as long as universities believe that students from disadvantaged

and a social responsibility of universities, and that it is logical and appropriate for universities, in view of their own missions, to respond to this responsibility.

The document Equality, Diversity and Excellence (NBEET, 1996) is intended to update the equity framework described in A Fair Chance For All (DEET, 1990). This document includes a recommendation:

> That the overall objective for [educational] equity in higher education be to enhance the capacity of the higher education system to contribute to Australia's social, cultural, political and economic vitality and strength through system and institutional action, which embraces the full diversity of the community and results in a student profile that fairly reflects that diversity (NBEET, 1996, p. xiii).

This provides an excellent basis for discussing educational equity as a social responsibility for universities.

The statement represents a more useable goal than that declared in A Fair Chance For All (DEET, 1990, p. 2) "to ensure that Australians from all groups in society have the opportunity to participate successfully in higher education" because it incorporates the basis for a rationale that universities can more readily relate to in terms of their own missions and directions - as a contribution to "Australia's social, cultural, political and economic vitality and strength".

Most, if not all, Australian universities have stated commitments to contributing to the development of society which can be interpreted as encompassing considerations of educational equity. The mission statement for the University of Southern Queensland, for example, includes as a principal institutional goal: "To

backgrounds do not make desirable students. This is the topic for an entire paper on its own. However, it is worth noting that in the same paragraph that the above quote was taken, the Higher Education Council stated:

> Simultaneously, the Council supports the requirement that institutions be accountable. Accountability can be deemed to reside within four broad areas [the first of which is] accountability to the public at large, both in terms of universities operating as an institution of society and in terms of the use of public funds (Higher Education Council, 1995, p. 11).

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